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ABSTRACT

The problem of sex-role stereotyping on television has been studied by trying to develop television materials that are explicitly counter-stereotypic in terms of sex-roles. The development of a new television series "Freestyle," aimed at 9-12 year old children and their families, has led to some important observations about children's perceptions of sex-role portrayals. Children look past gender to the qualities of the individual; they hold stereotypes but not unalterable ones. Children view cartoon characters enthusiastically but skeptically. Sex-role attributes seem to be the last things in the childrens minds when discussing these characters. On the other hand, children seem to view extreme sex-role stereotypes as so unreal as to be taken no more seriously than Bugs Bunny. Characterizations of real-life individuals, whether male or female, who mix those qualities of personality and behavior which make them "good people," are most attractive to children. (PJC)

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SEX ROLES ON TV: MORE THAN COUNTING BUTTONS AND BOWS

By Frederick Williams

In the trade they are already referring to it as the season where sex has replaced violence on television. This is paradoxical since objections to ethnic and sex role stereotypes on television have become nearly as shrill in recent years as those concerning violence. Even the government has gotten into the act. Witness the U.S. Commission on Civil Right's Window Dressing on the Set, a vehement attack on stereotyping.

The problem of sex-role stereotyping on television has been of intense interest to a consortium of us working under a four million dollar project of the National Institute of Education. This is not because we have been busy counting the number of male and female characters on television. Rather, it's because we have been given a significant opportunity to develop television materials that are explicitly counter-stereotypic in terms of sex-roles. The new series, launched on October 6th by PBS, is called "Freestyle" and is aimed at 9 through 12 year old children and their families. Unlike most television developed under educational funding, "Freestyle" is produced in Hollywood. It is meant to compete with the best of commercial television.

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Although we and our test audiences are most pleased with "Freestyle," a perhaps equally important outcome of this project is in what we believe we have learned about children's perceptions of sex role portrayals on television. Most of the critical attention given to sex role portrayals has devoted a major amount of attention to counting the incidence of male and female characters, whether they are negatively portrayed, and so on. The hue and cry has been that children, by their early grade school years, have already internalized bigoted sex role attitudes, mainly as a consequence of heavy television viewing. In the "Freestyle" project, some of us have been surprised to find so little credence in this way of thinking, and have been taken aback at the reliance of others on such a superficial view of children's perception of television. Granted, television should have variety and balance; it should facilitate our interpretations of "real life." But at the same time we should take extreme care in not oversimplifying how children apparently use television.

Consider, for example, the concept of stereotype. Most theories hold that a child has a very clear concept of gender identification long before the 9 through 12 year old range involved in our project. By preschool years this identification carries with it a cluster of learned attitudes about male and female differences in behavior. When these attitudes become sufficiently powerful to prompt almost reflexive expectations of the behaviors of others, they are stereotypes. For purposes of discussion, let us say that the less flexible is that expectation, the more "deeply" held is the stereotype.

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Has television led to significant sex-role stereotypes in young children? Somewhat to our own surprise, we found no evidence of deeply held stereotypes; stereotypes, yes, but not inalterable ones.

The children we studied (some 600 in detail in the Los Angeles area, another 1600 in less detail nationally) did have a great variety of attitudes about sex roles, but these attitudes did not fall as clearly into "male" versus "female" distinctions as some would believe. Instead, and as found in the last several years by other researchers, children tend to perceive qualities that they (or we) might associate as "male-like" or "female-like." Moreover, these qualities are not necessarily tied to perceptions of, or by, a boy or girl, man or woman. Children may perceive that a female character is "strong" and "perservering," but at the same time "gentle" and "thoughtful." Or a male might be perceived as "gentle" and "strong." The key generalization is that children can see past simple gender identification to the qualities of the individual, if the character's qualities are revealed and the children are motivated to examine them. That these qualities are "male-like" or "female-like" may be as much due to the assignment of such labels by researchers as it is to any gender associations made by the children.

It is hard to find child "bigots." A boy who would not be caught dead sewing might still find it perfectly acceptable for a

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girl to be an airline pilot. Further, strongly stereotyped responses that might show up on simple questionnaires may not be "strong" at all, as illustrated in this paraphrase of a conversation with a boy who said that women could not be truck drivers.

"Why?"
"Because trucks are too hard for them to steer."
"But you know about power steering, don't you?"
"Yeh, but women aren't strong enough to load trucks."
"But you use machines to load them, or what about a tanker truck?"
"Uh huh, well I guess girls could drive trucks."

How do children perceive sex roles on television? We believe that if the characters are somehow "real" (Bugs Bunny, their favorite, is not real; the Fonz is) to the children and if they "identify" with them (want to be like them or with them), the sex-role attributes are perceived much as in everyday life. The children look past gender to the qualities of the individual.

When we discuss favorite TV characters (Farrah Fawcett, Bugs Bunny, Fonzie, Six Million Dollar Man) with children, their comments are not all that predictable based upon the sex of child or performer. Although girls choose favorite characters more often among both males and females, than do boys, both seem interested in many qualities that are not necessarily tied to sex roles. Children identify most with characters who are active, good looking, admired by others, and whom they characterize generally as "good" people.

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Reality versus fantasy plays an important role in identification. In our work, "fantasy" has a simple manifestation in children's discussion of TV characters. It is found both in "real" characters (e.g., "Spiderman") who do things that the children say are not real, as well as in characters who altogether are not real (again, Bugs Bunny). We found it fruitless to engage children in discussions of sex-role characteristics of nonhuman cartoon characters even when the characters, as in several of our pilot segments, were expressly developed for such purposes. Cartoon superheros (whether or not portrayed by live actors) are perceived enthusiastically but skeptically by the children we have studied. They enjoy them but are very exacting in pointing out what is real and what is not. Sex-role attributes seem to be the last things in the children's minds when discussing these characters.

These foregoing generalizations eventually led us to develop "Freestyle" in terms of a dramatic series featuring a continuing cast of young performers whose characterizations could be thoroughly developed from program to program. Counterstereotypic behavior (a girl running a "fixit" business, a boy dropping sports to do a school project) is interwoven with traditional behaviors (the girls also sews; the boy roughhouses with his peers) lest the characters become unreal to the audience. Male versus female situations are shifted from competition to cooperation; gender is not emphasized. Our successes in pilot tests of these materials have lent support to our research generalizations.

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What of the effect of this new commercial television season, with its increased emphasis on sex? For one thing, our experience has led us to disbelieve that we already have an audience of preadolescent bigots eager to have their sex-role stereotypes reinforced. We also expect that the more extreme sex-role stereotypes that are the theme of some shows will be so unreal to children as to be taken no more seriously than Bugs Bunny. Most important will be the characterizations of real-life individuals who, whether male or female, mix those qualities of personality and behavior which make them the "good people" so attractive to children. If these qualities are the heart of the drama or comedy, we probably have little to worry about. However, if gender characteristics themselves are the program vehicle, then the networks and their packagers will have lived up to their own "T&A" label for the season. Least important will be a new flood of studies reporting on the number of buttons and bows.

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Frederick Williams is Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications and is director of formative research for "Freestyle."